Events Leading to the Establishment of the National Training Laboratories

ALFRED J. MARROW

The Commission on Community Interrelations (CCI) was an undertaking of the American Jewish Congress. It was launched in the summer of 1944 and was formed with the counsel and guidance of Kurt Lewin, assisted by Dorwin Cartwright, Rensis Likert, Ronald Lippitt, Douglas McGregor, myself, and others. Its aim was to deal with the increasingly critical problems of intergroup relations. The design was to seek out—through new methods of social inquiry—the underlying causes of prejudice and to work out ways of removing them. It was this aspect of the project that made the commission different from most agencies set up to fight prejudice. The plan was to study and evaluate the diversity of approaches toward the elimination of prejudice and to better them, if possible. The best available tools of the social sciences would be mustered. The emphasis was to be on action, but at all times on action tied to research. Its research was to consist of what Lewin called "action-research." The commission took for its maxim: "No research without action, no action without research."

At about the same time Lewin was the director of MIT's new Research Center for Group Dynamics. "An aim of this center," Lewin said, "is the better understanding of group living which can enable less prejudiced and more reasonable handling of group hostility." The Center would study all relations between the individual and the group. The faculty of this Center also served as consultants to the Commission on Community Interrelations. They helped in the research planning and

---

Alfred J. Marrow is a practicing consultant on human relations and chairman of the board both of the Harwood Manufacturing Corporation and the Weldon Manufacturing Corporation.

design of the early CCI experiments. The relationship between the two organizations became extremely close.

By January 1946, CCI had fallen into trouble, and Lewin and I arranged to deal with the problem in one of our weekly conferences. Manpower had never been in shorter supply. Financial support for the Commission's undertakings was far below what had been promised. The workload was more than our limited staff could carry. Incidents reported by the members of the American Jewish Congress across the country asking for help indicated a rise of anti-Semitism.

CCI's busy offices were located on the third floor of a run-down loft building at Broadway and 50th Street in the heart of New York City's theatrical district. But a lucky happening made it a delightful place to work. Marcel Breuer, the renowned architect and designer, who had been a friend of the Lewins from their Berlin days on, had agreed to design CCI's office and furniture for a small fee. In a few months the third floor of the old run-down building became one of the most tasteful work offices in the city. In the next years, distinguished architects from various parts of the world came to visit the CCI offices to see this example of Breuer's work.

Lewin was late in arriving for this conference. Tardiness was not unusual with him, so I waited while the office staff went home. I was beginning to feel irked when the telephone rang. An unfamiliar voice asked for Professor Lewin. When I explained that he had not yet arrived, the voice identified the speaker as Frank Simpson, executive director of the Connecticut Interracial Commission. He said he needed help, particularly in training leaders who could deal with intergroup tensions in their home communities. I suggested to Mr. Simpson that he telephone Lewin the next day.

Shortly afterward Lewin arrived, bubbly and harassed as ever. We at once took up our Commission's problems. I did not get around to mentioning the call from Frank Simpson until late that evening. To me the latter's problem was just another "fire" we were being called upon to put out. Nor did Lewin seem particularly interested in Mr. Simpson.

But after Simpson had talked to Lewin, Lewin's mood became entirely different. When we met the next afternoon, he

was eager to start on a new design for a workshop on leadership training. I argued against it. We did not have the staff, the time, the money, or the know-how. I reminded him that he personally was doing too much, that he was overworked, and that with his own poor health and his too widely scattered energies he had to take it easy. His response was the first of its kind that I had heard in the 13 years we had been close friends. "When you have to go to sleep each night, hearing the anguished screams of your mother as the brutal Nazis tortured her to death in a concentration camp, you can't think of 'taking it easy.' " I was silenced and we took on another heavy assignment.

As Lewin reported his conversation with Simpson, it became evident that what most bothered the latter and his fellow commissioners was that they were unsuccessful in energizing the forces of good will latent in the citizens of Connecticut toward effective solution of their intergroup tensions.

The leaders of the state commission recognized that they needed to do a much better job in training community leaders. Businessmen, labor leaders, schoolteachers seemed equally to require a training that would enable them to deal more successfully with such tensions. The methods in use seemed ineffective, and the commission was ready to try others in order to achieve the improvement in leadership they required. "This is why they turned to Lewin," Simpson said. What he was looking for was a simple new approach to training that would give the participants more skill in dealing with other people by teaching them better methods of changing people's attitudes and providing them with better insight into their own attitudes and values.

Lewin had on hand a stockpile of generalizations which his staff agreed might be applicable to Connecticut and would be worth trying out in an action-research leadership training experiment there. One generalization was that where people's long-held beliefs are an issue people must be moved to re-examine them by and for themselves if they are to recognize their inadequacies. This means that people must be willing to unlearn attitudes lived with over the years. Changing them is ever a personal task.

Action-research had discovered that it is only from his own new emotional experiences that man can gain new knowledge and new insight with which to re-evaluate his older attitudes and sentiments.

Hence, Lewin postulated, leadership training becomes effective only as it provides trainees with opportunities for feeling and knowing what their customary way of acting does to themselves and others by practicing it before their own group. Then, with the group's help in self-diagnosis, a person may develop a more realistic view of his own ways. If, as a trainee, he can be guided through an experience in which he comes to see himself as others see him their views of him may possibly make some sense to him.

Lewin agreed to talk with Frank Simpson and his Commission colleagues at MIT. They spent a day discussing the possibility of developing a genuine action-research project that would test ways of improving community leadership for bettering intergroup relations. Ronald Lippitt agreed to direct the project if it could be funded.

Several years earlier, Lewin had observed the critical importance of a give-and-take among group members during a series of foremen-training experiments directed by John R. P. French, Jr., at the Harwood Manufacturing Corporation plant. Role playing had been a large part of a period of leadership training, and it had been found that the evaluation and feedback phases of the training had brought criticism into the open in a healthy and constructive way.

Other experiments by members of Lewin's staff had led to the conclusion that when members of a group take part in a fact-finding inquiry the circumstance that the findings are their own leads to their changing their attitude and their subsequent behavior. As Lewin put it: "This result occurs because the facts become really *their* facts (as against other people's facts). An individual will believe facts he himself has discovered in the same way that he believes in himself." When the findings are his own, he cannot challenge them as being inadequate or impute any bias to the finder. If others have found the same thing at the same time, all must recognize—necessarily—that they had been mistaken!

Lewin's research into developing methods of changing levels of conduct and overcoming resistance to change had resulted in a number of classical experiments. There were those by Radke and Klisurich on changing food habits and those by Alex Bavelas on the effect of group decision on production workers. These studies and numerous others convinced Lewin that basic methods of changing behavior were already available. He had conceptualized these as levels of quasi-stationary equilibria and as the ways in which added forces changed conduct in a desired direction.

With this in mind, he welcomed the proposal of a working arrangement with the Connecticut State Commission for an integrated training and action-research workshop. But to set this up would cost a lot of money—and where was it to be had? All three groups—the Center at MIT, CCI, and the Connecticut State Commission—were operating on scant budgets. Lewin urged that the three share the costs and that each look for the money in its own way.

It was not easy. The search for funds created deep frictions in each of the organizations. The American Jewish Congress turned down an appeal for another grant; CCI could allocate some money from its own budget, but was already curtailing its program because money was lacking. The Connecticut State Commission neither understood the need nor commanded the means for such a comprehensive project. The Research Center at MIT was dependent for most of its finances on foundation grants and was operating on a shoestring. Each group did finally succeed in obtaining some money; together, there was not enough to cover the minimum costs. The responsibility for making up the needed balance was assumed by Lewin, with no success.

As he wrote by hand to Charles Hendry, then director of CCI, on April 15, 1946:

> I was very tired but went back to New York to fight the battle. If you and I, Stuart Cook, and Alfred Marrow would stick together through whatever comes, I feel we will win it. There will be painful things to do, but that has to be done.
>
> You are well aware that absolute, long-range security for research is something extremely rare to be found.
>
> In any type of action-research in the social field, security can never

be anything given on a legalistic level which one can "have and forget about." Social action is a part of a changing social world. Security in action-research has to be re-established anew every day.

I consider this crisis a question of life or death for CCI, and I am ready to go to any lengths to find a productive solution for the basic idea of that enterprise. I for one am not ready to give up.

So Lewin kept on trying to get the new project underwritten. He was wearing himself out. Then he came up with an idea that worked. He had met, some time before, a wealthy industrialist who was interested in supporting research on methods of changing the ethics of businessmen in business practices. Although the latter argued this with Lewin over a period of several years, he finally deposited $1 million in a special account to be used for research that Lewin would direct.

None of this money had at that time been spent. Lewin had been unable to design any projects that suited the tycoon. Lewin now suggested this project as something for whose deficit the industrialist could satisfactorily make himself responsible; for the Connecticut workshop would provide information that could serve very well in solving some aspects of the problem that troubled the wealthy man. The latter was reluctant to get involved in a joint project with other organizations. Lewin persuaded him, however, and the grant was made.

With money at last available, the kind of trained personnel required became the problem. Ronald Lippitt had already discussed the project with Leland Bradford and Kenneth Benne, and both had agreed to join the training staff. With these three as a nucleus the intensive planning of the workshop began. The time selected for the workshop was June 1946, and the place, New Britain, Connecticut. A book describing this project was written by Ronald Lippitt.[1]

The workshop worked. The results were so promising that even Lewin was gratified; and Lippitt, Bradford, and Benne asked him to collaborate with them on a similar workshop for the following summer that would be open to the general public. Alas! Lewin did not live to attend the first NTL session in the summer of 1947. Six months before, in February 1947, he died.

1. Lippitt, R. *Training in community relations.* New York: Harper & Bros., 1949.

The money that enabled NTL to conduct the first Bethel laboratory (1947) came from the ONR and the NEA. The second year's laboratory (1948) was helped financially by a grant from the Carnegie Corporation of New York to cover promotion, planning, and training costs.

An irony attends the pioneering struggles of the Connecticut Workshop. Despite its successful outcome, neither of the two sponsors—the American Jewish Congress and the Connecticut Interracial Commission—has in the subsequent years continued its interest or sent members of its staff to NTL.

The financial sponsor, after the workshop had ended, abruptly announced that he would no longer support any group dynamics research, and all but $40 thousand of his million-dollar grant was returned to him. So far as could be learned, his action was his way of expressing annoyance at not being successful in holding Lewin's exclusive interest. It was also his way of expressing negative appraisal of the leadership training venture which he felt certain would lead nowhere.

He did not know that within a year the Connecticut Workshop would lead to the founding of the National Training Laboratories—that NTL would become a permanent organization and that it would lead to some of the most exciting contributions to the science of human relations in this century.

Community Forum

It is the intention of the Editors of the Journal to stimulate dialogue and dissent in these pages. One way of doing this is to invite Letters to the Editor. I hope many of you will respond. Please address all correspondence to me.

Another opportunity to create fruitful controversy is to invite comments about those articles which strike at the very basis of the applied behavioral sciences and, in particular, at those assumptions which underlie laboratory education. Argyris' and Bass's articles in this issue easily qualify for this distinction, and we have asked a number of colleagues to comment.

—Warren G. Bennis
Associate Editor